Gender and Migration in Italy

A Multilayered Perspective

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Chapter 1

The 'Worker Nuns of Nigrizia': The Pious Mothers of *Nigrizia* between Italy and Africa during the Imperial Age (1872–1950)

Francesca Di Pasquale and Chiara Giorgi[1]

Introduction

From 1872, when the Comboni women's institution was established, and all throughout the period of the European colonial occupations of Africa, the 'Pious Mothers of Nigrizia', that is, the nuns of the religious order founded by Daniele Comboni, were key players of the missionary project for the African evangelization.[2] According to the ambitious and, at the same time, extremely pragmatic Comboni view, women played a key role for the conversion of *Nigrizia*,[3] fuelled by the belief that, unlike priests, nuns could fit into African society, penetrating the core of native families.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, within the entangled history of missions in Africa that combined evangelization with 'civilization' – imperialism with the hierarchization of race and gender – the

1 This chapter is the result of the fruitful exchange and the shared work of both the authors. However, Section 1, *'True Women' for Africa. The nuns in Daniele Comboni's missionary project*, was mainly written by Francesca Di Pasquale, while Section 2, *The Pious Mothers of Nigrizia in the Horn of Africa*, was mainly written by Chiara Giorgi.

The study is the first analysis of the history of the Pious Mothers of Nigrizia, with particular reference to their mobility. It should be underlined that the historical archive of the Comboni Missionary Sisters is still under archival processing. Access was limited to only some records, provided by Sister Mariateresa Girola, who is in charge of the archive. For this invaluable help and, more generally, for the very stimulating exchange of ideas, we wish to thank Sister Mariateresa Girola and Sister Maria Vidale.

2 See Romanato (2003: 259) and Vidale (2012).

3 According to the *Dizionario universale della lingua italiana*, by Carlo A. Vanzon, published in 1836, *Nigrizia* was the vast African area which included many regions like *Bambara*, *Tumbuctu*, *Congo*, *Niffe*, *Funda*, *Bornù*, *Mandara*, *Darfur*, *Cordofan*, and many others. It bordered the Sahara to the north, the south of Egypt (*Nubia*) to the east, Guinea to the south and Senegal and Gambia on the west. See Vanzon (1836: 179). Actually, for Comboni, *Nigrizia* was synonymous of Africa.

history of the Comboni mission displayed very distinctive features.[4] We can consider, for example, the primitive form of 'inculturation' that Comboni, in the light of the previous and mainly ruinous missionary experiences, tried to implement to spread the Catholic creed among natives (Romanato, 2003: 296). The centrality of the 'Worker Nuns of Nigrizia'[5] in Comboni's plan was certainly one of the most significant features of his project. 'Created' by Comboni for the primary aim of devoting their lives entirely to the conversion of *Nigrizia*, starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, dozens of women, mainly from Italy, began journeying to Africa. In turn, some African women were involved in the missionary project from its beginning, according to the guiding principle of the *Piano per la rigenerazione dell'Africa* (Plan for the regeneration of Africa) by Comboni, which is 'saving Africa with Africa'.[6]

The history of the 'Pious Mothers of Nigrizia' represents a fruitful perspective from which to analyse female mobility during the imperial age, and our chapter looks into their history through this specific point of view. More precisely, here we use the word mobility, on the one hand, referring to its spatial meaning, that is, to the history of migrations and exchanges between Europe and Africa, which characterized the history of the Pious Mothers. Their history was transnational indeed, not uniquely for the history of women on the move between Italy and Africa. Daniele Comboni was born in the Austro-Hungarian Lombardy-Venetia, and the Habsburg Empire was his main political and social point of reference. The Comboni mission raised funds and obtained political support mainly in that territory. Therefore, the European boundaries were the first to be crossed.

On the other hand, we aim to explore if and how the Comboni missionary activities triggered social mobility in both Italian and African nuns alike. In Comboni's letters, the woman's role is exalted, even astonishingly so. However, through a deeper analysis, other features also come to light, in particular his view of women. If at first it may seem far-sighted, at the same time it also included some discriminatory features. Notwithstanding the preeminent position that Comboni assigned to nuns in terms of African evangelization, on the whole in many respects it subverted the role of women, as established by European bourgeois imaginary in the second half of the nineteenth century.

As mentioned above, the Comboni female congregation admitted African women to the mission from its onset. Fortunata Quascè, from Sudan, was the first African woman in the Comboni mission to take her nun's vows. She experienced all the tribulations characterizing the history of the first decades of the Comboni

4 Within the extensive literature on missionaries, Italian colonialism and religion in Africa, see in particular: Betti (1996); Borruso (1988, 1989); Ceci (2007); Chelati Dirar (2002 and 2003); Fonzi (1988 and 1996); Franzinelli (1992); and Prudhomme (2007). For the Comboni mission, see Romanato (2003).

5 'Suore operaie della Nigrizia': Vidale (2012: 78).

6 In Italian: 'Salvare l'Africa con l'Africa'. After the first edition in 1864, the *Piano* was re-edited in 1871. See Comboni (1991: 840–52).

sisters in Africa, not least of which, the captivity by Mahdi 'rebels' during the Dervish revolt in Sudan (1882–86).[7] During the colonial age, on the other hand, the mode of relating to African women seemed to change in accordance with the political imperatives of the Italian government and, in particular, to native African politics. Indeed, in colonial Eritrea, not until July 1939 did the first six young Eritrean women take their vows as 'Pious Sisters of Nigrizia'. They represented the first group of 'native novice women' (*novizie indigene*).[8] In 1942, four other Eritrean women also took their vows. In May 1946, six native nuns (including one of mixed 'race') joined the congregation. In the following years, the number of Eritrean women aspiring to join the mission constantly increased.

In sum, the Combonian sisters' experience was at the centre of multiple dynamics concerning not only the question of women's mobility between Italy and Africa and within Africa itself, but also more general themes like gender relations and the conflicts this sparked, including with those opposing missionary nuns and priests, the men who embodied colonial power and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. After Comboni's death, the difficulty of securing any formal recognition of the congregation's autonomy – which existed *de facto* across Europe and Africa – was principally due to the various kinds of resistance put up by their male counterparts. The various representatives of the male counterparts, including their highest-ranking leaders, seem to have been rather alarmed by the autonomy that a female congregation brought to the expansion of its activity beyond the central African mission initially planned for it. The fear also concerned the foundation of other European bases helping it to recruit and train personnel ready to join its African missions.

In many regards, this history requires the deployment 'in the field' of an analysis depsychologising and resocialising – as Judith Butler put it – the role of the *Nigrizia* nuns in the plan conceived by Daniele Comboni. The subjectivity of the women working in the service of this project (whether Italians or Africans) should thus be analysed in light of numerous factors and protagonists – convinced as we are that this is an important chapter in the history of gender, the history of Africa and, at the same time, the history of Italian colonialism.

'True Women' for Africa: The Nuns in Daniele Comboni's Missionary Project

In terms of the results attained, that is, the number of 'outposts' and of Africans involved, and for the intensity of its penetration, the Comboni mission certainly

7 For the history of Fortunata Quascè see Vidale (2005).

8 The ceremony had solemn and impressive tones. In February 1938, the first six candidates to join the mission officially started their trial period, under the blessing of Pope Pious XI. See the record n. 5963, VI/H10/2/v2, Asmara, Casa Comboni, 7 October 1939, on the occasion of the *Festa del S. Rosario*, held in the historical archive of the Comboni Missionary Sisters.

achieved much more than previous missionary experiences had in the Curacy of Central Africa.[9]

Daniele Comboni first travelled to Africa in 1857 with five other missionaries of the Verona Religious Institute, founded by the priest Nicola Mazza, where Comboni himself entered the seminary. In the following decade, he travelled widely throughout Africa, as his assignment, bestowed onto him by Father Mazza, was the liberation of enslaved boys and girls. He also travelled throughout Europe as well, particularly in Germany; here he established contacts with the 'Society of Cologne', the humanitarian institute which became one of the main sources of funding for the Comboni missionary activities. In 1867 he wrote the first edition of the *Piano per la rigenerazione dell'Africa* ('Plan for the Regeneration of Africa'), which was his project, but also his manifesto for the mission in Africa. In his plan, Daniele Comboni sought to work for Africa, availing himself of men and women capable of dealing with the massive African environmental barriers and to interact with African 'otherness' in a way that also proved fruitful for the evangelization project. To this end, he envisaged establishing intermediate outposts, which were later founded in Egypt, in order to allow the missionaries to gradually come into contact with the African climate and culture. The continent would have been converted and 'civilized' by Africans themselves; the training of native clergy and the integration of African people into the missionary project was aimed at fully penetrating the continent. Following the proposal advanced by *Propaganda Fide*,[10] in 1872 Pope Pious IX appointed Comboni Pro-Vicar Apostolic of Central Africa. Five years later he became bishop (Romanato, 2003: 248–70).

In many respects, women were the keystone of the Comboni missionary plan: 'A Sister of Charity in central Africa is worth three priests in Europe and this century of persecution of the Church … is the century of the catholic woman'.[11] According to Comboni, his mission was successful, whereas previous ones had been less so, because of the frontline involvement of the 'omnipotent ministry of the woman bringing the Gospel and of the Sister of Charity, who is a shield, power, and a guarantee of the Missionary's ministry'.[12] The 'Pious Mothers of

9 On the missions in Africa before Comboni, see Romanato (2003: 25–189). The Curacy of Central Africa was established by *Propaganda Fide* in 1846. Through the curacy, the Holy See aimed at the evangelization of the whole continent. Actually, until the period of activity of Comboni, it had operated only in the territories of present-day Sudan: Romanato (2003: 50–60).

10 *Propaganda Fide* was the ecclesiastic institution, founded in 1622, which had jurisdiction over all the territories peopled by 'infidels', that is over the missions, aiming at the evangelization of non-Christian and non-Catholic people.

11 In Italian: 'La Suora di Carità nell'Africa Centrale fa come tre preti in Europa e questo secolo di persecuzione contro la Chiesa …, è il secolo della donna cattolica'. See the letter to the mother superior of the Sisters of St Joseph, 30 July 1877, in Vidale (2012: 77).

12 In Italian: 'onnipotente ministero della donna del Vangelo, e della Suora di carità, che è lo scudo, la forza, e la garanzia del ministero del Missionario'. See the letter to Mother Maria Annunziata Coseghi in Gebel Nuba, 24 July 1878, in Comboni (1991: 1515).

Nigrizia' order was established in 1872, even before the Comboni Fathers order, because nuns were the key to the evangelization of Africa.[13] In 1877, five years after the Pious Mothers were founded, the first five missionary sisters arrived in Africa; they were 'the vanguard of the new Institution whose mission is to foster its apostolic activities in the many regions of central Africa'.[14]

In his view, women were not exalted by their spirituality or purity, but, instead for very concrete features, starting with their physical resilience to the African climate, which, according to Comboni, was greater in European women than in men.[15] Comboni sought nuns who were like 'soldiers',[16] ready to sacrifice themselves and even die for Africa: 'cannon fodder'[17] for the evangelization of *Nigrizia*, according to the crude definition of the Vicar Apostolic. They had to be 'saints', but without bigotry, because in Africa it is necessary to instead be tolerant.[18] After all, Comboni was not predominantly a mystic or a theorist, but an extremely pragmatic man. Throughout his missionary activity he combined very innovative features with others which were a legacy of the traditionalist culture, based on a 'granitic faith' that was not at all undermined by the Age of Enlightenment (Romanato, 2003: 8, 367).

In the *Piano*, the position of women originated from a utilitarian view of their contribution to the mission, rather than aiming at women's liberation or at the subversion of the gender dynamics that defined women's roles in nineteenth-century Europe. Comboni sought 'instruments' for the conversion of *Nigrizia* and looked for 'true women', that is, first of all educated but also 'trustworthy,

13 Maria Bollezzoli, who came from the Ursuline Sisters, was the first mother superior. Before the institution of the Pious Mothers, Comboni had worked in Africa with the nuns belonging to the French order of St Joseph of the Apparition. Comboni decided to institute the congregation in Verona to rally nuns for *Nigrizia* because of the scarce number of sisters made available by the French order for the African mission. For the foundation of the congregation see Vidale (2012).

14 In Italian: 'l'avanguardia della nuova Istituzione destinata a riprendere la sua azione apostolica nelle numerose contrade dell'Africa Centrale'. The first five missionary sisters in Africa were Sister Teresa Grigolini and Sister Marietta Caspi from the diocese of Verona, Sister Maria Giuseppa and Sister Concetta Corsi from the diocese of Trani, and Sister Vittoria Paganini from the diocese of Padua. See the letter to Jean Francois Des Gares, 17 May 1878 in Comboni (1991: 1484) and Vidale (2012: 85–110).

15 The reference to the physical resilience of the 'European woman' is found in the first edition of the *Piano*: 'Sunto del nuovo disegno della Società dei sacri cuori di Gesù e Maria per la conversione della Nigrizia proposto alla S. Congregazione di Prof. da Fide da D. Daniele Comboni dell'Ist.o Mazza 1864', in Comboni (1991: 240).

16 See the letter to Mother Emile Julien from the Saint Joseph Order, Cairo, 15 December 1872, in Comboni (1991: 941).

17 In Italian: 'Carne da macello'. See the letter to Jean François Des Garets, 19 June 1879, in Comboni (1991: 1608).

18 In Italian: 'ma non col collo storto, perché in Africa bisogna averlo dritto'. From the letter to Father Giuseppe Sembianti, 12 February 1881, in Comboni (1991: 1834).

handsome and judicious'[19] women, and, if possible, with a handsome dowry. The woman with all of these qualities was the ideal candidate for the entrance enrolment in the Pious Mothers, even if she were an illegitimate child, who were usually not admitted to the mission: as Comboni explained 'every rule is subject to exceptions … because suckers do not go to heaven', expressing frankly the pragmatism mentioned above.[20] On the other hand, admittance to the mission was forbidden for the 'lowly female servants': those who 'came to escape starvation', because 'Africa will not be converted by the household help from Verona'.[21]

According to Comboni, the presence in Africa of the Pious Mothers was an instrument for the 'civilization' of the 'barbaric' populations and the 'infidels', and this idea originated, first of all, from his view of the condition of 'ignominy' of the African women, in particular for those living among Islamic populations, where they were regarded 'only as a domestic tool, an instrument of immorality'.[22] Taking into account the subjection of women, but also the practice of slavery, Comboni's view of Islam was not exempt from intolerance, denoting disregard and rejection of the populations which embraced Muslim faith. On the whole, if, on the one hand his judgment of African populations was seemingly advanced, on the other hand it resulted from an extremely stern culture according to which the territories of 'infidels' were marked by backwardness and immorality, whereas conversion to Christianity meant civilization. After all, in the European colonial culture, women's conditions among natives were one of the main cultural markers indicating the gap between colonists and colonized and between 'barbarity' and 'civilization' (Levine, 2004; Sorgoni, 2000).

Nine years after founding the Pious Mothers, four Comboni Sisters missionaries' outposts were already operating in Africa, and specifically in Kharthoum, el-Obeid, Gebel Delen and Malbes. The latter was a Christian village established by Comboni missionaries, modelled after the Jesuits' *Reducciones* in South America and populated by families trained by the mission to live in a Christian way.[23] The presence of the nuns in this village, which was the most 'advanced' and, at the same time, violent experiment with African populations by Comboni missions, further demonstrates Comboni's absolute faith in the

19 In Italian: 'serie, buone, di giudizio'. See the letter to Father Giuseppe Sembianti, 12 February 1881, in Comboni (1991: 1825).

20 In Italian: 'ogni regola patisce le sue eccezioni … perché i menchioni [sic] non vanno in paradiso'. From the letter to Father Giuseppe Sembianti, 20 April 1881, in Comboni (1991: 1888).

21 In Italian: ''furono tutte servacce che venivano per cavarsi la fame'; 'Colle serve di Verona non si converte l'Africa'. From the letter to Germano Tomellieri, 24 April 1872, in Comboni (1991: 900).

22 In Italian: 'Solamente come un arnese di casa, come uno strumento di immoralità', in the *Rapporto sulla azione apostolica del Vicariato dell'Africa centrale*, 1877, sent to Pia Opera della Santa Infanzia di Parigi, in Comboni (1991: 1338).

23 Romanato (2003: 322) rightly reports on the process of 'de-Africanization' characterizing this experience.

evangelizing capabilities of the Pious Mothers.[24] His project to evangelize Africa through women originated from his understanding that only women could fully penetrate African society, through their female African counterpart, and, thus, instil the first seeds for conversion. In his *Piano*, the *Corpo delle giovanette negre* ('Corps of the young black women') was made up of female preceptors, to educate in the Catholic religion 'the dissolute female African society', of 'expert teachers and family women, which have to promote female education in reading, writing, arithmetic, spinning, sewing, weaving, taking care of the sick, as well as practicing all the more practical female skills for central *Nigrizia*'.[25] Finally, among those not pursuing marriage, the 'Virgins of Charity' would have been selected to constitute 'the most distinguished phalanx of the women's Corps whose mission it would be to … practice the ministry of catholic women among the *Nigrizia* tribes'.[26] The first involvement of African women commenced in 1867, when fourteen women coming from the 'white river' arrived in Europe on the occasion of the redemption of some slaves, 'having been educated in all the female skills', and which Comboni assigned to 'educate the black girls in Egypt and to move to their native land in order to disseminate among those tribes the advantages and the benefits of civilization which they have received from the European culture'.[27]

Among these was Fortunata Quascè, who was the first 'Virgin of Charity' of the Comboni mission. Fortunata arrived in Verona in 1853 with a group of boys and girls redeemed from slavery at the Cairo market by the mission of Father Mazza. Actually, among other things, redemption implicated the eradication of these 'black' youths from their native cultural, social context and environment, with the effect that most died an untimely death in Europe due to the problems of adapting to the new environment. The young women trained in religious institutes were compelled by circumstance to become nuns, as they had no other opportunity for social integration (Romanato, 2003: 214). Of course, this general framework does not provide the whole picture of the African Pious Mothers, as the history of Fortunata Quascè shows in many respects: as she wrote in a letter to Comboni, she chose the religious life with conviction and joy (Vidale, 2005: 82–5). At the same time, what she experienced in Africa and, in particular, her captivity during

24 From the letter to the father of the missionary, sent from Malbes, 24 April 1881, in Comboni (1991: 1892).

25 In Italian: 'degradata femminil società africana'; 'abili maestre e donne di famiglia, le quali dovranno promuovere l'istruzione femminile in leggere, scrivere, far conti, filare, cucire, tessere, assistere agli infermi, ed esercitare tutte le arti donnesche più utili ai paesi della Nigrizia Centrale', in *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa*, in Comboni (1991: 238–9).

26 In Italian: 'istruite in tutte le arti femminili'; 'la più eletta falange del Corpo femminile destinata … ad esercitare il ministero della donna cattolica fra le tribù della Nigrizia', in *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa*, in Comboni (1991: 238–9).

27 In Italian: 'istruire in Egitto le piccole morette e a spostarsi nel loro paese natale al fine di comunicare a quelle tribù i vantaggi e i benefici della civilizzazione che esse hanno ricevuto dalla civiltà europea'. See the letter to De Lamenie De Brienne, 22 August 1867, in Comboni (1991: 417).

the Mahdi revolt, also demonstrates that missionary penetration into Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was characterized by violent religious clashes. The first African women were primarily trained to convert *Nigrizia* and to uproot Islam in African territories, which, at the time of these missions of the apostolic curacy, was rapidly spreading. According to testimonials from nuns, it seems that the brutality of the Mahdi 'rebels' towards Comboni missionaries sisters and, in particular, the 'black' nun in order to force her to forswear Catholicism and reconvert to her native religion, had the same origin, that is, the struggle between two monotheisms (Vidale, 2005: 109). Anyway, the life of Fortunata Quascè was an important piece of the history of the Pious Mothers and testifies to the 'worldiness, to the Africanity' which connoted the origins of this women's missionary institute (Vidale, 2005: 9).

On the whole, the Comboni sisters who had served in Africa during the first decade of the congregation's history had to ride out unspeakable hardships, adapt themselves to complicated and very unstable circumstances, and face many adversities, not least captivity during the Mahdi revolt. Some missionary outposts were set up by the nuns without no outside support. After Comboni's death in 1881, the nuns experienced a troubled period, mainly because of the opposition by the Jesuits, who, at that time, were in charge of the training for Comboni priesthood. The dispute was resolved thanks to the firmness of Maria Bollezzoli, mother superior of the Pious Mothers, but also to the support of the bishop of Verona, Luigi di Canossa, and of the first Comboni male missionaries who had worked with the nuns in Africa. In particular, Luigi di Canossa was the first supporter of Comboni and was familiar with the Pious Mothers congregation since its constitution (Vidale, 2013: 75–95). In order to weaken the female congregation, some priests resorted to conjectures on the supposed weak 'morality' of some sisters. This attempt to denigrate the nuns was consistent with the gender view of nineteenth-century imperial Europe, which considered women, by their very nature, to be constantly liable to slip back into immorality.[28]

All things considered, the missionary experience gave them a preeminent position, inconceivable for the time in late nineteenth-century Europe, and overturned the view of the 'holy and pious' woman. Even though the memoirs and more recent historical reconstructions by the Pious Mothers bear out this same pious view, the events after Comboni's death show that these first female apostles for *Nigrizia* were well-aware of having conquered a new role in the missionaries scenario and, furthermore, had no intention of forfeiting it.

28 Vidale (2013: 167–8). Furthermore, in 1898, Monsignor Roveggio, new Vicar Apostolic, removed Francesca Dalmasso from the position of mother provincial superior for Africa, because she was regarded hardly 'submissive'. See Vidale (2013: 209–10).

The Pious Mothers of *Nigrizia* in the Horn of Africa

In 1952–53, the number of pupils at Comboni College was the highest of any of the 32 schools controlled by the various religious orders ('several of which were sections of the School run by the Italian state in Eritrea').[29] Even more importantly for our purposes, the attendees at the *Sacra Famiglia/Santa Famiglia* (an educational arm of the Comboni congregation considered the institution that gave greatest expression to the missionaries' efforts) were of similarly large numbers. How was this possible? And what role did the Comboni nuns have in educational matters, which they considered – according to their own accounts – their main field of intervention?[30]

The Pious Mothers of Nigrizia's first arrival in the Italian colonies dates back to 1914, when Costanza Caldara (then General Superior to the Comboni congregation) sent six nuns to Eritrea on the instigation of Luigi Bonomi, a collaborator of the Comboni missionaries in Sudan and former prisoner of the Mahdi's. After a remarkable journey, the Comboni sisters arrived in Massawa in December 1914, with the Italian government's full agreement and with the goal of offering assistance at the Regina Elena colonial hospital in Asmara (where Bonomi was the chaplain). This first phase in the Pious Mothers of Nigrizia's presence – which we could, moreover, frame in terms of a period of women's mobility in Italian missionary efforts (whether from Italy or Egypt) – was entirely occupied by this welfare work (mostly nursing care) and characterized by numerous tensions resulting from friction with Italian military and medical personnel.[31] Up until 1927, the Pious Mothers of Nigrizia worked in the Regina Elena hospital; then, on the express say-so of the colonial government, they also extended their nursing activities to Massawa's Umberto I hospital (where the first community was formed); and soon afterward they took to the educational field, in the Vittorio Emanuele III state school.

This school was also the Italian government's wish and on the orders of Governor Jacopo Gasperini, it was dedicated to the education of Eritreans only. It was situated in the Amba Galliano area.[32] Of note, here, is that the Comboni nuns assumed a decisive role on account of other religious orders' reticence over engaging in the field of education, as well as the colonial government's lack of interventionism in this regard. As we know, already by the beginning of the era of

29 Puglisi (1953: 145–8). In the Comboni College there were 550 students; in Sant'Anna there were 450 students and in the *Sacra Famiglia* there were 420.

30 Chelati Dirar (2002: 149–88; 2003: 391–410).

31 In Eritrea the 'Pious Mothers of Nigrizia' had been preceded by the Daughters of St Anne (1895) which came after the Sisters of Charity, coadjutors of the fathers 'Lazarists'. The first superior in Eritrea was Pia Marani.

32 In 1929, the missionaries' residential community was moved to the new complex built by the Italian government near to the school where they were working. On Italian educational policy in Eritrea see Palma (2007: 211–38); Negash (1987: 78).

the apostolic prefecture, the missionaries had a sort of mandate covering all aspects of public education. This was a result of the Eritrean colony's lack of resources and more generally of the government's own awareness that the Catholic missionaries were useful for helping to spread Italian culture (moreover, they were useful to encourage both a 'social and cultural Italianisation of the colonial territory' and the 'production of colonial subjects'). The Catholic missionaries also consolidated the colonial authority, in particular due to the linguistic and ethnographic knowledge they had accumulated over their years 'on the ground'. Without doubt, this – strategically important – supply-teaching role had the support not only of the Vicar Apostolic (Celestino Cattaneo, Camillo Carrara's successor), but also of the colonial authorities themselves (as personified in the new Fascist governor Corrado Zoli). It also provided, indirectly, the basis for the growth of their leading role in education and, in some aspects, confirmed the usefulness and effectiveness of women's involvement in the work of evangelization in Africa, as Comboni himself had foreseen in his own time. As for the question of adequately preparing the Comboni nuns for their teaching activity, the first women involved – in some cases called up from missions in Egypt – were the most educated and those with most experience of teaching elsewhere; in time, other nuns followed and these latter had teaching diplomas and had previously worked in state primary schools. Small schools were also set up in other localities, mostly for Eritreans. For example, in Dekhemhare the Comboni nuns obtained the military authorities' permission to open a labour school for 'indigenous girls', but also, soon afterwards, a (separate) nursery school for Italians' sons. In Senafe, from 1938 until the outbreak of the war, the already legally recognized school for Eritreans was entrusted to the Pious Mothers. Near Cheren, at the cathedral of Chidane Mehret, the Comboni nuns were given control of teaching and management functions at the Catholic girls' school created by the first Eritrean Catholic bishop of Oriental rite.

With Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, the Comboni nuns mostly turned from teaching activities to nursing care at various military hospitals, though they did maintain some presence at a few small parish schools, most of them frequented by Eritreans. In this same period, the Comboni nuns – whose numbers had grown on account of the General Superior's urgent demands on the 'contingent' present in Egypt – collaborated with the military chaplains and began to undertake their first own parish work, together with the Capuchins. Yet only in 1937 did their first missionary work begin in some areas of Eritrea, when the Comboni nuns were assigned the apostolic prefecture of Gondar and when Pietro Villa was appointed apostolic prefect. The Mothers of Nigrizia, accompanying the Comboni fathers, thus began their own missionary work in Adigrat in the apostolic prefecture of Tigrai, and soon afterwards (1939) in Gondar (in the *Casa del fanciullo*, 'kids' house'). At the same time, as educational and welfare work expanded, Asmara saw the first training of young Eritrean women in the so-called religious life. At the end of the conflict, with the Vittorio Emanuele III school returning to its educational activity (having been used as a military hospital) the Italian government decided to donate its new annexes to the Pious Mothers of Nigrizia. These were converted

into a boarding school for Italian children and would have been the headquarters of the *Istituto Santa Famiglia*. One of the annexes was devoted to a girls' school, 'training' them in what was considered specifically women's work. A telling sign of the Italian government's support was the positive judgment passed by Andrea Festa – director of education in Eritrea – ordering a display of this work to be shown at the Naples *Oltremare* exhibition.[33]

We ought to note that the girls' schools, like those for boys, prepared what the missionaries themselves called 'a fertile terrain for religious vocations'. In the same period, the nuns regained control of what was the first nucleus of the future *Casa Comboni*. In subsequent years it became a shelter for all those who found themselves in difficulties and, with the opening of the orphanage, a space for encounters between Italian nuns and Eritrean women – and girls. Opening in 1932 as the *Pia Opera Daniele Comboni* (not without opposition) it was requisitioned by the air force on the eve of the Ethiopian war. Only in 1938 was it handed back to the Mothers of Nigrizia, principally devoted to sheltering single mothers with children and subsequently the wholly Fascist project called *Protezione della Giovane* ('Protecting Young Women'). It was also here that the indigenous novitiate began, starting with Eritrean girls who wanted to become nuns, most of whom had first been taken in as orphans: 'Such it was that the first six of them aspiring to the religious life were chosen'.[34] In July 1939 the first African novices were joined by a group of Italian novices from Verona, with the goal of 'building up the indigenous novitiate'. Thus, 1939 was the year when the authorities gave the green light to the Novitiate for National and Indigenous Women (this also being the 25th anniversary of the first Italian missionaries' arrival in Eritrea). In 1940 the Italian nuns working in the Apostolic Vicariate of Eritrea were some 130 in number, spread across various villages and for the most part dedicated to hospital and educational activities (in state schools).

At the time the Second World War broke out, various communities of Comboni nuns were created in several different parts of Eritrea, within the terms of the educational and healthcare activities authorized or encouraged by the Italian government. However, the war also marked the beginning of the Pious Mothers' departure from their missionary posts (and indeed many of the missions themselves came to an end) and, at the same time, it was decided that *Casa Comboni* was a shelter for refugees and the missionaries themselves.

Throughout the length of the conflict, the Pious Mothers played a significant role in the wider context of the Catholic church's welfare efforts 'devoted to the needs of the newly-impoverished' and seeking to alleviate 'the oppressive situation of the Italian community' (Guazzini, 2008: 66–7) whom they offered

33 Despite being aware that the schools that aspired to the highest teaching standards had been those belonging to the Swedish mission, closed in 1932. See Trevaskis (1960: 33)

34 'Suore missionarie comboniane' (undated: 21).

spaces for socializing.[35] With the closing down of all the state schools in Asmara (due to bombings) the *Istituto Santa Famiglia* became the new main centre for the private tuition of Italian and 'mixed-race' boys and girls.[36] The *Istituto* was respected – or rather, authorized and legalized – even by the occupiers, thanks to an agreement between the Italian school authorities and the top officials of the British administration. As we read in a report from the historical archive of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, the Vicar Apostolic himself indicated in a visit to the *Istituto Santa Famiglia* (a few days after the British arrived) what very particular rules to follow: 'these are sad days, he said, but we must not lose hope: if we stick to our religious role and avoid interfering in politics, they will leave us in peace. They gave me their word'.[37]

Thus the fall of the Italian colonial government and the onset of the new British administration did not change the nature of the Comboni nuns' educational and welfare activities. This happened despite the initial blow interrupting the expansion of missionary activities in the most remote parts of Ethiopia, and their expulsion from teaching in public schools for the local population. Indeed, the missionaries who had just previously been carrying out aid work helping refugees would soon return to such a role, helping prisoners, escapees and the displaced.

> In Dekhemhare, to take one example from the missionary records, on 3 September 1941 three sisters set up a nursery at the "Casa del Bimbo" and the other 15 Pious Mothers who had provided their services at the military hospital, after having had to comply with the military high command's order to head collectively for Asmara, were now able to return there. They then provided various parochial and educational services for the local population and the roughly 8,000 Italians.[38]

While in some places the British administration took the control of the schools for indigenous pupils out of the Italian missionaries' hands, and many schools were now put to some other use, the missionaries, who were tolerated by the British, in many cases did manage to remain in their posts. They were often given the responsibility of assisting the village populations 'morally and materially', above all where there was a large number of women (i.e. war widows). In this

35 About the British Military Administration see Trevaskis (1960), Negash (1997), Lucchetti (2012).

36 Not by chance did it set up classes from the first grade of elementary school to the fifth grade of *ginnasio.*

37 'Suore missionarie comboniane' (n.d.: 34). In Italian: 'A Decamerè, per riportare un esempio tratto dalla cronaca missionaria, tre sorella il 3 settembre del 41 avevano iniziato un loro asilo presso la "Casa del Bimbo" e le altre 15 Pie Madri che avevano prestato il loro servizio presso l'ospedale militare dopo aver dovuto adempiere l'ordine militare superiore di partire collettivamente per Asmara vi avevano potuto far ritorno. Esse allora si prestarono per svariate opere parrocchiali ed educative in favore della popolazione locale e dei circa 8000 italiani'.

38 'Suore missionarie comboniane' (publication untitled).

same period, on the personal initiative of General Superior Carla Troenzi – who had been in Asmara ever since the war broke out – the first Eritrean novices to be invested in 1939 were admitted to the order as Pious Sisters of Nigrizia (with a consecration that could be renewed each year). The years following 1943 were the period in which the Comboni nuns' educational activity reached its height: they were active in numerous elementary and middle schools.[39] They were particularly active in Asmara, not only in their teaching 'on the Italian model', but also through their presence at English and Tigrinya schools working under the framework established by the new authorities.

Casa Comboni's own main activity was the Eritrean girls' school (this also providing English- and Tigrinya-language classes) and indeed it served as the female branch of the Comboni College (founded in 1947). At the beginning of the 1950s the *Istituto Santa Famiglia* (later *Sacra Famiglia*) – which from 1946 moved to a new building as a college or school – was further extended, becoming – as Puglisi's early accounts show – 'one of the most important educational centres' belonging to the Congregation of the Pious Mothers of Nigrizia. This period also saw the birth of a teacher-training institute and a language school specifically devoted to girls of non-Italian nationality; these, too, were managed by the Comboni nuns and both of them recognized by the colonial government. Outside Asmara, some missionaries continued to be active visiting the villages – as they had always done, moving between the missions set up in various locations – also providing healthcare for the ill, services for children and in some cases working on the upkeep of churches. On the other hand, their evangelization effort required them to move around, penetrating into the most difficult areas (Senafe, for example, where there was also a strong Muslim and Coptic-schismatic element).

Meanwhile – still in the early 1950s – faced with the alternative of setting up a local congregation built around the Pious Sisters of Nigrizia, consecrated in 1942, or bringing them into the Pious Mothers, they chose the latter option. Thus they fully accomplished the long process (beginning in 1939) that ultimately did see Eritrean women joining the Comboni congregation.

Conclusions

The most important questions emerging from this history without doubt concern the Comboni nuns' interactions with the colonial power and, more generally, with the Italian and British colonial administrations.[40] At the same time, they

39 As well as continuing to be present, without any significant break, at the Regina Elena hospital in Asmara and the Umberto I hospital in Massawa, to which we could add their welfare work in the women's prisons.

40 The relation 'between colonialism and missions' is the question of greatest interest when it comes to the European Christians' second colonisation of Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century. See Calchi Novati (2011: 295).

also concern their relations with the male ecclesiastical hierarchy, above all in the first period of this experience (the second half of the nineteenth century). The central feature of the Combonian nuns' relations with the Fascist and then British authorities – in a situation of never-directly-expressed conflict – was the female Catholic missionaries' ceaseless defence of their own autonomy. And there certainly were moments of tension with the Italian authorities and indeed with the British authorities.

However, this tension was often concealed, indirectly surfacing from direct accounts and particular acts, and it was managed – but also ignored – by the women missionaries for the sake of guaranteeing the survival of their welfare and educational activities. Thus they sought to 'take advantage' of the role historically attributed to women, which was also indirectly recognized in their own case: the field of care and the sphere of social reproduction. Moreover, the teaching they supplied (in the context of state schools' lack of resources) but above all the intermediary role they embodied in their relations with the local societies played in their favour as they sought to conserve a certain margin of autonomy. More generally, the missionaries intensified their presence in Eritrea (and Ethiopia) during the colonial occupation era, becoming ever more active in 'creating centres of community life' and 'taking on a leading role in Eritrean life'. They benefited from the colonial authorities' encouragement of Catholicism in terms of the creation of new missionary schools, the management of existing ones, and the strengthening of Italian propaganda (beginning with Salvago Raggi's governorship and continuing under Fascism).[41]

The formation of a local clergy was also of great importance to the overall picture from the very origins of the missions' history.[42] It was believed that this would help the evangelization process by bringing the populations closer to Catholic values and making their conversion easier. Above all, the Combonian missionaries encouraged the development of an African clergy (one of Comboni's own first objectives) as well as African nuns, according to the idea that they could 'plant' Christianity in African reality and the basic postulate that evangelization in Africa had to be the work and the responsibility of Africans themselves.[43] The Comboni nuns are placed in this context, which provides a policy of compromise with the Italian government. Particularly significant in this regard was the great importance the Comboni plan ascribed to the centrality of Africa and its potential and, in turn, to women. Not by chance were the first religious schools for girls in the Horn of Africa established with the help of the Congregation of the Pious Mothers of Nigrizia, and the first Eritrean nuns – coming long after their first appearance in the Egyptian and Sudanese contexts and incomparably later than the Eritrean priests – were the Pious Sisters of *Nigrizia*.

41 Taddia (1986: 170).

42 Conscious 'of the importance of the training of Eritrean prelates, the Apostolic Vicariate's policy vigorously encouraged their development'. See Taddia (1986: 174–5).

43 See Calchi Novati and Valsecchi (2005: 162).

Finally, also of interest in this experience is the great importance of the theme of 'moving', as missionaries journeyed from Italy to Africa, between African cities (Cairo, Khartoum, Asmara), between different parts of Eritrea itself, and between one mission and another. If, indeed, the phenomenon of mobility was of considerable importance to the history of colonial administrators for the purposes of a 'far-reaching and secure control over territory and the colonized populations',[44] so too could we advance similar considerations with regard to the Catholic missions.

This is all the more true when we look at Comboni's own plan: 'saving Africa with Africa' meant entering into direct contact with the local populations, and, above all, with women. It meant 'penetrating' (this word being something of a commonplace in missionary accounts and testimonies) into populations who were distant and inaccessible – not only in a geographical sense. That is, it meant finding the key to access another world – to know it, get closer to it and bring it toward a shared set of objectives – and for Comboni, women seemed to offer this key.

In short, we could say that using women (the Comboni nuns) to evangelize among African women and to evangelize in Africa more generally was a particular experience both in the history of European Catholic missions in Africa and in the subjectivation experienced by Italian women migrants to Africa as well as African women themselves, with all its light and shade.

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44 Giorgi (2012: 229). In Italian: 'un controllo ramificato e sicuro sul territorio e sulle popolazioni colonizzate'.

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